Equipped

Dobbs clopped slowly past cornfields and cottages, bees and cream-colored butterflies. Tom and Willie sat in the front of the cart. They had left Sammy behind to collapse in the cool darkness of the tiled hallway. Willie clutched the long wooden seat, and as they jolted over the rough cobbled road, his eyelids drooped. Suddenly he gave a frightened start, for he had nearly fallen asleep and the ground below seemed a long distance away. Tom pulled on the reins and they came to a halt.
"Here," he said, "you hop in the cart and take a nap." He helped Willie into the back and threw him an old rug to cover himself with, for he still looked terribly pale.

As soon as the rhythmic motion of the cart began, Willie fell into a disjointed sleep. His thin elbows and shoulder blades hit the sides of the cart at frequent intervals, so that he would wake suddenly, only to fall back exhausted into a chaotically dream-filled sleep. He was just about to be attacked by a horde of anxious faces when he felt himself being gently shaken.
"We's comin' into it, boy. Raise yerself."
Willie staggered to his feet and hung on to the side of the cart. They jogged past a river that was sheltered by overhanging trees. It curved and disappeared from view behind some old buildings.
"Remember any of this?"
Willie shook his head. "No."
They halted at a blacksmith's. Tom stepped down and lifted Willie after him. He untied Dobbs and led her into a large dark shed. Willie heard him talking to someone inside. It wasn't long before he reappeared and swiftly removed his haversack, bags and boxes from the back of the cart. He placed a hand on Willie's shoulder.
"We got a lot to do, boy. You reckon you can keep up?"
Willie nodded.

Tom handed him one of the two small buff-coloured boxes and they both slung them over their shoulders and set off. They passed a bicycle shop and a cobbler's and turned a corner into the main street. It curved round a large square.
"On market days that be filled with all kinds of stalls," said Tom.
In the center of the square was a stone archway with a clock in its wall, and on the ground below, surrounding it on four sides, were wooden benches. They stopped outside a newspaper shop. Two placards were leaning up against the walls.
Poland Invaded! read one, and Turn your wireless low. Remember, someone might be on duty, read the other. The door of the shop was already propped wide open.
"Hot, ent it?" said a tiny old lady from behind the counter. "Your usual is it, Mr. Oakley?" she added.
Tom nodded.
She reached up to a yellow tin of tobacco on one of the shelves. A pile of comics caught Willie's eye. Tom glanced at him.
"One candy and one comic," he said sharply. "Choose."
Willie was stunned.
"Don't you hurry, sonny," said the old lady kindly. "You jes' takes yer time." She pointed up at some of the many jars. "We got boiled ones, fruit drops, farthin' chews, mints, there's lollies, of course. They's popular. There's strawberry, lemon, lime and orange."
Tom was annoyed at the long silence that followed and was just about to say something when he caught sight of Willie's face.
Willie swallowed hard. He'd never been asked to choose anything ever.
"A lolly, please, Miss," he said at last.
"What flavor?"
He frowned and panicked for a moment. "Strawberry," he answered huskily.
The old lady opened the jar and handed one to him. It was wrapped up in black-and-white striped paper and twisted like a unicorn's horn.
"Now what comic would you like, dear?"

Willie felt hopeless. What use would a comic be to him—he wouldn't be able to understand the words. He loved the colors, though, and the pictures looked so funny and exciting. He glanced up at Tom.
"I can't read, Mister Tom."
"I know that," he replied shortly, "but I can, after yer Bible."

Willie turned back to look at the comics, so that he missed the surprised expression on Tom's face. The words had leapt out of his mouth before he had had a chance to stop them. He felt a mixture of astonishment at himself and irritation that his rigid daily routine was going to be broken after forty undisturbed years. Willie at last chose a comic with his lolly, and Tom paid for them. It was his first comic. His hands shook as he held it.
"Get movin', boy," barked Tom's voice behind him. "Are you deaf?"
Willie jumped. "Come on," he repeated.
Willie followed him next door into a chemist's shop and then into a grocery shop. They stopped outside Lyons' tea house, where there was a selection of cakes in the window. A man in uniform sat at a table nearby, with a young, weeping girl. Willie looked up at the shadow that the man's body was casting across her face.
"Later, perhaps," said Tom, thinking that Willie was eyeing the buns.
As they were crossing the square, Willie tugged at Tom's sleeve.
"Mister Tom," he said urgently. "Mister Tom, I knows this place. I remember. That's where I were yesterday."

They looked across at the railway station. A group of young soldiers were standing outside talking excitedly, their bulging kit bags leaning up against their legs. A batch of children accompanied by a young woman and the Billeting Officer who had brought Willie had walked past them and were heading towards the Town Hall. They shuffled forward in a dazed manner holding hands, their labels hanging round their necks. They were a motley bunch.
Some with rosy cheeks in brand-new coats and sandals, some thin and jaundiced, wearing clothes that were either too small or too large.

"Come on, William," said Tom. "I got a list of things a mile long fer the draper's."
The draper's shop stood on the sidewalk opposite. Next to it was a toy shop.
"You want to look at the toys while I go in here?"
Willie shook his head. He didn't want to be left on his own.
"As you please," said Tom, and they stepped into the darkness of the draper's.
The shop was piled high with rolls of materials. Tom and Willie inched their way between them. At the end of a roofless tunnel they found themselves standing in front of a long, high wooden counter. A smartly dressed, middle-aged man was cutting a piece of cloth.
"Good morning, Mr. Hoakley," he said cheerfully. "Blacks hall right, hare they?"
Tom grunted in the affirmative.
A sound of light organ music came from a large wireless at the end of the counter.
"For the latest news," the draper explained. "I must say, this waiting is getting hon my nerves.
That Chamberlain's so slow. We're ready for 'Itler. I ses let's get on with it and stop this shillyshallying."
"I been hearing that blessed organ music on and off all blimmin' day," said Tom grumpily.
"Can't he play no other instrument?"
"That's Sandy Macpherson," said the draper. "Wonderful man. Holding the B.B.C. together hin this national time hof stress, Mr. Hoakley."
"Sure he ent causin' it?" retorted Tom.
"Oh, Mr. Hoakley," said the draper. "I'm sure you don't mean ..." His words were cut short at the sight of Willie's dull, sandy hair on the other side of the counter.
"He's with me," said Tom quickly. "I brung a list from Mrs. Fletcher for materials." He pushed a list across the counter. "Boy's only got what he's standing up in."

The draper beamed. "A pleasure, Mr. Hoakley. I'll 'ave to measure 'im myself. I'm a bit short staffed hat present." He flicked the long tape measure from around his neck and eyed Willie.
"There's not a lot of 'im, his there?" he remarked disappointedly.
Willie craned his head over the counter and watched him measuring and cutting two rolls of gray and navy flannel. A roll of corduroy lay at the end of the counter. He reached out and touched it. It felt soft and firm. He let his fingers drift gently over the ridges. Tom caught sight of him.
"Might as well bring out several colors of that cordeeroy," he said.
The draper looked surprised. "Really. Oh well, if you say so, Mr. Hoakley."
"Two colors you can have, William. Takes yer choice."
The draper laid out rolls of green, brown, rust, navy, gray and red. Willie eyed Tom's green trousers. He pointed to the green roll and after a pause to the navy.
"Good," muttered Tom. The boy's beginning to think for himself, he thought.

Willie smiled nervously and leaned with his back against the counter to look at the other materials. There were crimsons and ambers, turquoises and sea greens, materials of every shade and texture. Tom leaned down and Willie found himself being fitted for suspenders.
"We'll have these braces," Tom said, placing them on the counter.
Willie continued to gaze at the materials. He loved the reds, but Mum said red was a sinful color.
"I've to go to the bank," he heard Mister Tom say, "so I'll give you a deposit, like."
"No 'urry, Mr. Hoakley. I'll be 'ere hall day."
The draper chatted about rising prices, 'Itler and the price of butter while Tom grunted in acknowledgment.
"Called hup this morning," Willie heard him say, "so if you know anyone who'd be looking for a job, let me know. I'll heeven take a young girl," he said, "if she's bright. ..."

He wrapped the material in sheets of brown paper. Willie longed to touch it, but it was put under the counter and he quickly followed Tom back through the dark tunnel of materials and out into the daylight. Next door was a shoe shop. It was packed with people buying up stout shoes. After a wait in the queue Tom at last managed to get served.
"Boots," he said, indicating Willie's feet.
Willie sat on a chair as his feet were placed in a measuring gauge.
"Leather's a bit stiff at first," said Tom as Willie stood up in a solid pair of brown ankle boots.
"But we'll get some linseed oil to soften them up."
A huge lump seemed to burn Willie's chest. It slowly rose into his throat.
"Are they fer me?" he asked.
"Well, they ent fer me," answered Tom shortly.
The assistant put them in a paper bag and Tom handed them to Willie.

They stepped off the sidewalk outside and crossed over to another group of shops that curved around the square. Two men were building a warden's post with sandbags. A large poster hung above them advertising A.R.P. outfits. Tom stopped at the corner where the shop stood and looked across at the Fire Station. It stood next to the Town Hall. A queue of men was standing outside, soberly reporting for duty. A trickle of sweat rolled down the side of Tom's face. He mopped it with his handkerchief.
The heat was stifling. There was no hint of a breeze anywhere. He felt a tug at his trouser leg.
"What is it?" he grunted.
Willie was pointing to a tiny shop down the small road they had just crossed. It was on the corner of a cobbled alleyway off the road. The front of the shop was unpainted varnished wood with faded gold lettering above it. In the front window was a display of paintbrushes arranged in a fan. Tubes and colored pots and boxes were scattered below.

Tom's heart sank. He hadn't been in the shop since Rachel had died. It was her favorite place. For forty years he hadn't been able to bring himself to venture into it again. There had been no reason anyway. He didn't paint. He remembered how pleased she would be at the mere thought of a visit.
"Paint has a lovely smell, ent it?" she'd say. "And a lovely feel." And he would laugh at her soft, nonsensical way of talking.
"What about it, William?" asked Tom quietly. "You wants to take a look?"
Willie nodded feverishly.
"Only in the window, mind. I ent got time to dally inside."
Willie gazed at the shop dreamily as he crossed the road. A car hooted at him.
"Mind where you's goin'!" yelled the angry driver.
"Boy's in a daze," murmured Tom.

Willie peered in the window and wiped away the mist his breath was making on the glass. There were boxes of colored crayons and wax, lead pencils and paints in colors he never knew existed. Large empty pads of white paper lay waiting to be filled in. He looked lovingly at the paintbrushes. There were thin elegant ones for the most delicate of lines ranging out to thick ones you could grip hard and slosh around in bold, creamy-colored strokes. Tom stood behind him and stared over his head into the shop. He remembered how Rachel used to spin with delight in there. Her long black hair, which was always tied back in a knot at the nape of her neck, would spring constantly outwards in a curly disarray whenever she was suddenly excited. She could look at a row of colors for hours and never be bored.
"If I painted the sky," she had said one day, "I could go through life paintin' nothin' else, for it's always changin'. It never stays still."
He looked down at Willie, who was making shapes with his finger on the misted window.
"What you doin'?"
"Drawrin'," said Willie. "It's one of them brushes."

Tom peered at it. "Humph!" he retorted. "Is it?"
He turned abruptly away and Willie followed him up the lane and back onto the main street. They stopped outside a library.
"Best join," said Tom, "if you's goin' to stay, that is."
They opened the door and entered a large expanse of silence. Someone coughed. Willie tugged at Tom's trouser leg.
"What is it?" he whispered in irritation.
"Mister Tom," he whispered, "why is it so quiet?"
Tom sighed in exasperation. "So's people can hear theirselves read."

They walked up to a large wooden table covered at each end with a pile of books. A tall, thin, angular woman in her thirties sat behind it, her long legs stretching out from under it. She wore spectacles and had fine auburn hair that was swept back untidily into a bun. She looked up at them and allowed her glasses to fall from her nose. They dangled on a piece of string around her neck.
"I've come to join him up," said Tom indicating Willie. "He's with me."
Miss Emilia Thorne gazed at Willie, stared at Tom and then took another look at Willie.
"With you?" she asked in astonishment. "With you!" she repeated.
"But you're . . ." She was about to say, "a bad-tempered, frosty old . . ." but she stopped herself.
"I'm what?" asked Tom.
"You're ... so busy."
Too busy, she thought. He never helped or joined in any of the village activities and had ignored all the signs that a war was approaching. She leaned over the table and gasped. They were both carrying their gas masks. She blinked and looked again. There was no mistaking it. The buff-colored boxes were hanging over their shoulders. Mr. Oakley, of all people, was wearing a gas mask!
"We ent got all day," said Tom sharply. "I'll leave the boy here. I got shoppin' to do."
Willie paled. Tom took a look at his face and groaned inwardly. How had he allowed himself to be landed with such a sickly, dependent

boy? But Willie was sick with excitement, not fear. Even though he couldn't read, the sight of books thrilled him.
" 'Ow many's he allowed to have?"
"Three," answered Miss Thorne.
"Let him choose two with pictures and . . ." He paused for an instant. He never liked asking anyone favors.
"Yes?" said Miss Thorne.
"Choose one that you think would be suitable for me to read to him, like. He ent learned yet.
And I've forgotten what young uns like, see." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "One has to do one's dooty, don't one?"
"Yes, of course, Mr. Oakley," she replied hastily. She watched Tom leave the library.
"Now," she said, producing a pale-blue card. "What's your name? Your address I know."
Meanwhile, Tom stepped out of the coolness of the bank. It was ominously close. People were still huddled in groups in the square, talking anxiously. Out of the corner of his eye he saw some wirelesses in a shop window. He paused in front of them.
"Echo," he read, "Bakelite." There, on display, was a small ten-by-four-inch wireless. It was run on batteries that had to be recharged. Ideal for someone like him who had no electricity. It was made of light wood with two large circular openings, one with a fretted front, the other fitted with a dial. Something to think about if he had to leave the boy on his own, like. Lot of money, though.
He stopped at the corner and glanced down at the tiny alleyway where the artist's shop stood. He hadn't time, he thought, and he set off briskly towards the blacksmith's, his rucksack and his bags already bulging. He had also a box of groceries to pick up, and some wooden and cardboard boxes that he thought would be useful for Willie's room.

Within half an hour he was back at the library. He peered through the glass at the top of the door. Willie was kneeling on a chair absorbed in books, his elbows resting on a long wooden

table. Miss Thorne towered beside him, pointing at something on one of the pages. Tom hesitated for a moment and then walked hurriedly along the small road back towards the artist's shop.
"Forty-odd years," he muttered, staring into its window. "Is that how long it is?"
The same bell, he thought. He paused for an instant and then stepped inside. Willie felt a hand touch his shoulder. It was Tom. He was carrying a parcel.
"Ready to go now," he said quietly.
Willie had his finger on a large letter. "That's an O, ain't it, mister?" Tom bent down to look.
The book was filled with pictures of a marmalade-colored cat.
"That's right," said Tom. "You knows yer alphabet then?"
"I nearly knows it." He looked up quickly. "Mister Tom," he asked timidly, "will you help me?"

He looked down at the book, clenched his hands and held his breath. Now he'd be in for it. Don't ask help from anyone, his mum had said. He waited for the cuff around the ear.
"Yes," said Tom. "I expect I can talk to Mrs. Hartridge or whoever's your teacher and ask what you need to practice."
Miss Thorne interrupted him. "Don't go working him too hard. Looks like he could do with some of our country air."
"He'll git plenty of that," snapped Tom. "There's veg to plant and Dobbs to look after, and weeding."
Miss Thorne said no more. Poor boy, she thought, away from his loving home and now dumped with an irritable old man.
Tom picked up Willie's three books and gave them to him to carry. The one Miss Thorne had chosen was Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories.*
"It's not very educational, I'm afraid, Mr. Oakley."
''Did I say I wanted somethin' educational?"
"No, Mr. Oakley."
"Then don't put words in my mouth."

"No, Mr. Oakley," and she suppressed a smile. After they had left, she stood in the doorway and watched them walking down the main street past the square.
"What an odd couple," she whispered to herself. "Wait till I tell May!"
"Run," roared Tom, and he and Willie tore down the pathway to the cottage. They were only just in time. The sky gave one almighty shake and split open. Rain and hail bounced on the tiled roof with such venom that Tom and Willie were quite deafened. They had to shout to make themselves heard. Sam growled and barked out of the front window.

Tom put the blacks up, lit the lamps and began unpacking the parcels.
"These are pyjamas, William," he said, lifting up two blue-and-white-striped garments. "You wear them in bed."
"Pie-jarmers," repeated Willie, copying Tom's way of speaking.

"That's right. Now," he said, "you going to sleep in the bed tonight?"
Willie looked startled.
"Bed's for dead people, ain't it?"
Tom stood up. "Come with me."
Willie followed him across the passage to Tom's bedroom. He hovered in the doorway.
"Come in," he said. "Don't dally." Willie took a step in. "See this here bed? I've slept *in* it for forty yer or more and I ent dead yet, and that basket at the end is Sammy's bed, when he's a mind."
They returned to the front room and, after a light tea of eggs and toast, Willie changed for bed and positioned himself by the armchair, next to Tom. The rain continued to fall heavily outside, rattling the windows unceasingly.
"I'll have to fairly shout this story," yelled Tom above the noise.
Willie sat in his crisp new pyjamas. It had felt strange the previous night going to bed without wearing his underpants; but this odd suit felt even stranger.
"Mister Tom," he said, "ain't you goin' to read from the Bible?"

"Didn't you like it from me head then, like last night?"
"Yeh," said Willie, "yeh, I did."
"I shouldn't think you'd understand all them long words anyways."
"No, Mister Tom," said Willie, feeling deeply relieved at not having to pretend anymore.
"Can I have 'Noah's Ark' again?"
Tom related the tale for the second time and followed it with the daring exploits of Pecos Bill from the comic Willie had chosen.
After a cup of cocoa, Willie brushed his teeth over an aluminum bowl and then dashed out into the garden to the little wooden outhouse, wearing his mackintosh and a new pair of gum boots while Tom sheltered him with an umbrella.
They carried the mattress upstairs between them. Tom placed a rubber sheet on it and made the bed over it, Willie helping him when he was able.
"There," Tom said when they had finished. "You can wet the bed till kingdom come."
"Mister Tom," whispered Willie, "ain't you angry wiv me?"
"No," Tom grunted. "When I first had Sammy he peed all over the blimmin' place. Takes time to settle into a new place and its ways."
He turned down the blankets and Willie climbed in between the sheets. Sammy sat on the bump where his feet were.
"I put yer comic and library books on yer table."
"Thanks, Mister Tom," and he bent down to pick up the book with the marmalade cat in it. Tom watched him tracing words with his fingers.
"Ten minutes."
But Willie didn't hear. He was lost in the colored pictures. A loud knocking came from downstairs. Sammy leaped off the bed and started barking. Tom quickly checked that the blacks were firmly on Willie's window and disappeared down the ladder, holding a squirming Sammy in his arms. Willie raised his head for a moment to listen.
"Good evenin', Mrs. Fletcher," he heard Tom say in a surprised tone.
"Come in."

He turned back to his book, and soon Tom reappeared to blow the lamp out. The room was blanketed in darkness until the blacks were removed.
"Good night, William," he said, tousling Willie's hair. "Pot's by the bed if you wants it."
Willie was exhausted. His head whirled with the names and faces of all the people he had met that day. He was just thinking about the boy in the post office when he fell instantly into a deep sleep.